



United States Mission to the OSCE

Response to H.E. Nikola Poposki, Foreign Minister of Macedonia, and Ambassador Gerard Stoudmann, Special Representative of the OSCE Chairmanship for the Western Balkans

As delivered by Ambassador Daniel B. Baer
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
June 11, 2015

We welcome Foreign Minister Poposki and Ambassador Stoudmann to the Permanent Council, and thank you both for your statements. The recent events in Macedonia have been the subject of considerable attention at the Permanent Council. The disclosures of illegal wiretaps and the information included in those recordings, involving allegations of electoral fraud, intimidation of media, and corruption, relate directly to Macedonia's adherence to OSCE commitments.

We note the vital role of the OSCE Mission in Skopje throughout this crisis, in facilitating dialogue and keeping us informed about the latest developments. We thank you, Foreign Minister Poposki, for your assistance over the past several months in hosting a number of visits to Skopje by OSCE representatives and delegations. Such visits and discussions allow us to ensure that the OSCE's tools can help assist Macedonia and its people to work through this crisis in a deliberative and inclusive manner.

I want to thank you as well for being here today, Mr. Minister. I know that you have a busy schedule and when a crisis hits it's always hard to fit an additional visit into a busy schedule – but Macedonia has many friends around this table, and you being here today, and sharing your views so frankly, helps the many friends of Macedonia figure out how best to support Macedonia.

Ambassador Stoudmann, we appreciate your efforts to promote dialogue between the sides and to represent the Chairmanship in assuring the highest level of support from the OSCE for constructive solutions to the ongoing crisis. We urge you to continue these efforts, as part of your broader mandate within the Western Balkans region, and look forward to additional and regular reports to delegations here in Vienna throughout the remainder of this year.

We welcome the willingness of Johannes Hahn, EU Commissioner for European Neighborhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations, to facilitate negotiations between key actors in the crisis, including through the meeting that was held in Brussels just yesterday. We deeply regret, however, that in spite of Commissioner Hahn's efforts, those key actors were unable to come to a common position at yesterday's talks on the details of how to move forward toward early elections and a resolution of the current crisis. We urge the parties to redouble their efforts on an urgent basis to reach durable, compromise solutions, building on what they agreed in Skopje on June 2.

Minister Poposki, a tremendous amount of work lies ahead for the political leaders of Macedonia to move the country ahead on its Euro-Atlantic path. They must strive to align the conditions in the country with the aspirations of its people for a prosperous, stable, democratic state founded on Euro-Atlantic principles. Progress is vital in several key areas, to include establishing a level playing field for elections, combating corruption, strengthening judicial and prosecutorial independence, and resuming parliamentary deliberations that are constructive and inclusive.

We urge immediate attention to adopting the electoral reforms called for in ODIHR's July 2014 report. Among the many concerns about the electoral process, the ODIHR report identified shortcomings regarding media bias, inadequate separation between party and state activities, and voter intimidation. It also outlined that there were "repeated and credible allegations of the major political parties promising or threatening to withhold social welfare benefits and vote-buying among economically disadvantaged and socially vulnerable groups, particularly the Roma and ethnic Turk communities." The government should undertake steps to rebuild confidence in the electoral process in the coming months. Those steps must protect the integrity of the voting rights of all, including Macedonia's Romani minority.

The wiretaps that were released have given rise to significant allegations of wrongdoing and corruption that must be addressed through an independent, transparent, and unbiased investigation. Macedonia's public resources must be used in a transparent and accountable fashion, for the full benefit of its entire population, and not for the enrichment of a few in positions of influence and power. An independent judiciary is essential, not just in investigating and prosecuting corruption and other cases related to the crisis but for Macedonia's Euro-Atlantic future.

Media freedom is also critical to ensuring that the allegations raised in the wiretaps are addressed appropriately. While a number of media outlets have reported on the substance of the wiretap cases, this does not eliminate the need to address serious concerns about violence and intimidation against journalists and media outlets, the undue influence on media of government advertising purchases, and other concerns.

Tens of thousands participated in peaceful public demonstrations last month, and we encourage those involved, both citizens and political leaders, to continue to reject violence. We categorically reject any attempts to cast this crisis in terms that would incite ethnic tensions.

While the government may not bear sole blame for the current crisis, it bears a special responsibility by virtue of its status as the governing power. As such, the government should begin to make progress on vital reforms regardless of the status of discussions with opposition leaders. We urge Prime Minister Gruevski to begin that work now. At the same time, we urge Mr. Zaev of the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia to return to constructive engagement. Political leaders of Macedonia owe it to the people they serve to work together to end this crisis.

Everyone lost yesterday: the parties in the talks, the people of Macedonia, the international community that cares about your country's future. I'm glad to hear your sense of urgency, Mr. Minister, in moving forward in the coming days and weeks.

Minister Poposki and Ambassador Stoudmann, we again thank you both for your statements here today. We will continue to maintain high interest in the situation in Macedonia. We stand ready to assist you when you address these challenges, and to ensure you have access to the full array of OSCE tools and assets as you do so.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.